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## Ramadan culture in modern Cairo

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Nineteen year old Nadia studies Business Administration at a prestigious private university in Cairo.<sup>1</sup> She has just gotten back from her summer vacation that she spent in an elite private resort in the north coast of Egypt. Nadia describes her summer as completely *riwish* (slang Arabic word for fun and fashionable youngster or lifestyle) with no school work and lots of free time. She recalls the pleasurable time at the beach with family and friends, swimming, dancing and socializing. She describes her parents as 'open-minded' who let her go out with friends, impose a late curfew during summer (mid-night) and allow boys to call her at home. They are, however, strict when it comes to matters like going out with a boy alone and staying out late at night. Her parents are worried that the neighbours will start bad-mouthing her and put her reputation at stake. Nadia shyly tells me about her 'summer love' stories with a boy she met one night at a cafe. His name is Hany and she describes him as funny, considerate and, as she quickly assures me, from a good respectable family. She hopes that her relationship will evolve to end in marriage.

Meanwhile, Nadia's relationship with Hany has to be 'put on hold' as Ramadan is approaching and her free time will be dedicated to other more important things. Before Ramadan begins her focus shifts to preparing herself for the fasting month. She needs to start the 'process of purification' or *tahara* by cleaning herself, putting away the 'usual', tight and revealing clothes she wears and replace them with more modest outfits. Moreover, she has to make up for those fasting days missed in the previous Ramadan. Finally, Nadia bids farewell to some leisure activities and places she is accustomed to go to all year long. These include restaurants or bars that serve alcohol, swimming in her bikini and cruising around with Hany in his car.

Ramadan for Nadia and many others represents an interesting blend of fun and piety or as she referred to it as *shahr dehk wa le`b wa gad wa hob* to imply that Ramadan

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<sup>1</sup> Nadia is a fictional portrait where several real persons are collapsed into a condensed portrait for the sake of illustration. I use this condensed portrait in this context to highlight the main changes in leisure behavior that occur, among upper-middle class female youth, with the advent of Ramadan and contestations that are triggered as a result.

is the month of laughter, play, seriousness and love.<sup>2</sup> She explained that Ramadan in Egypt is the time for increased recreation, primarily family outings, television viewing, eating bountiful of food and visiting cultural or Islamic heritage sites. At the same time, it is a pious month that demands worship and service to Allah, the ‘ultimate love’ she explains.

One of Nadia’s favourite past-time activities in Ramadan is participation in the *tarawih* prayers with friends.<sup>3</sup> She sends mobile-phone text-messages to her friends whenever she is going to pre-arrange a meeting point and fix a time so that they can meet and go together. She also attends religious classes at friends’ houses that are not only confined to reading the Koran and *hadith* (pl. *ahadith*) but also socialization and exchange of information on studies, summer job opportunities abroad etc.<sup>4</sup> She learnt about these religious classes through an announcement posted on Facebook, a social networking internet website. As for charity work, Nadia volunteers in a *ma’idat al-Rahman* in Boulaq area, which is very different from the elite Heliopolis district where she resides.<sup>5</sup> For Nadia, Ramadan is not only about prayers and fasting, but also community engagement and individual empowerment. Surely community work does not only enable people like Nadia to develop their communities but also to expand personal and professional skills, like managerial and communication, that are essential for successful business entrepreneurs. Nadia’s ambition is to graduate with honours and to work in the marketing field at high stature multinational corporations, such as P&G or Unilever. She sees Islam as a source of support and not an obstacle to her career ambitions.

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<sup>2</sup> *Dehk wa le`b wa gad wa hob* is a phrase borrowed from legendary Egyptian singer Abdel Halim Hafiz’s title song, which is highly favored among the Egyptian public. Unlike Nadia’s referral to ‘love’ as an expression of gratitude to God, Hafiz used the word love to express romantic emotions towards his beloved.

<sup>3</sup> *Tarawih* are special supererogatory prayers carried out in Ramadan. According to Prophet Muhammed: ‘Whoever observes night prayer in Ramadan as an expression of his faith and to seek reward from Allah, his previous sins will be blotted out’ (Hadith Muslim).

<sup>4</sup> *Ahadith* are the oral traditions relating to the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammed.

<sup>5</sup> *Ma’idat al-Rahman* or the banquet of the Merciful, is a philanthropic service offering free meals at fast-breaking time during Ramadan. The name refers to a Koran account (5:112-115) of how God (merciful) sent ‘a table set with food’ to Jesus and his disciples.

Nadia considers the shift in her leisure habits as the ‘usual and recommended mode’ or *haga `adeya wa marghoba* to achieve a higher state of piety. Nevertheless, many members of the older generations, particularly lower-middle classes, disagree with how Nadia’s age-group understand and realize piety. They describe the noticeable change in youth’s behavior as ‘hypocritical’ and suspect that it lacks longevity and, in connection to this, a thorough understanding of religion. Females’ behavior, in particular, attracts high attention among the public, as they are perceived as the main cultural and religious pillars of society. In addition, members of the older generations disapprove of youth’s leisure as it is believed to have become more individualized. They explain that Ramadan should *yelem el-nas* or gather people more through shared meals and other communal activities. *Umma* or unity is a key virtue of Islam that is commonly perceived by some as losing its essence due to the rushed lifestyles that youth lead nowadays. Also some people criticize youth’s leisure for emasculating older ‘authentic’ Ramadan traditions. All these common perceptions shared by a large segment of the Egyptian population are based on the notion that religious values and traditional practices have become undermined in contemporary times. My analysis of Ramadan practices in Cairo reveal that modernization has not simply led to the demise of religion and traditions, but rather redefined their functions and structure to provide a meaningful system for affluent Muslims nowadays.<sup>6</sup>

This book documents the leisure patterns of young upper-middle class women like Nadia with the advent of the holy month. This research is, however, not only confined to mapping out youth’s behavior in Ramadan, but rather takes on contestations pertaining to their leisure as points of crystallization for more crucial issues in contemporary Egyptian society. Ramadan in particular serves as a unique setting to study societal discourses on religion and modernization. Crucial social issues that become highlighted in the fasting month mainly pertain to (1) Realization, challenges and motivations for achieving a higher state of piety within the profane and consumerist

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<sup>6</sup> I avoid the use of the term ‘modernity’ because of its epochal connotations with Western Enlightenment, positing that science, technology and rationality would gradually liberate people from the supposed constraints of kinship, tradition, religion and superstition. Modernization instead stresses on the dynamism of modernity as bounded in a particular context.

context Ramadan is embedded in (2) Re-affirmation and/or leveling of both social class and gender distinctions in relation to access to leisure resources (3) Re-positioning of 'authentic' leisure commodities, activities and spaces relative to the global/market culture and nation-state ambitions. In other words, I explore how piety, social cohesion and authenticity are perceived and realized in relationship to new modern conditions. In discussing modernization, attention will be directed towards the crucial changes in social, economic and political circumstances in Egypt that have altered understandings of religion, national identity and, finally, social structure in the past few decades. Predominant spatial transformations in urban Cairo that have influenced access to public leisure spaces and re-affirmed social inequalities will also be explored. These contextual alterations underlie the main contestations related to Ramadan leisure, the forms and functions of which have become modified, reinterpreted and (re)invented to fit modern living.

## **1. Ramadan: A Time for Piety and Festivity**

The holy Muslim month of Ramadan is a significant time for believing Muslims. It is the period that presents the idealized Islamic way of life where key virtues of Islam such as *umma* (unity), *taqwa* (piety), *sadaqa* (charity), *gufran* (forgiveness) and *iltizam* (discipline) are emphasized and practiced. Ramadan thus does not only comprise of fasting or abstaining from food, drink and sexual relations from dawn to dusk. Rather, it includes intensified participation in other acts of religious obligations, called *`ibadat* in Islamic jurisprudence, that are believed to realize key Islamic virtues. These include increased involvement in prayers, particularly *salat gama`a* (congregation prayers), reading the Koran, attending religious classes and philanthropy. These religious activities are complemented by persistent attempts to abstain from vices, such as alcohol consumption, and other misdeeds that may threaten one's ability to achieve a high level of piousness during the holy month. In other words, people's leisure time becomes more dedicated to religious acts that include contemplation and other meaningful spiritual pursuits. Ramadan for many Muslim Egyptians thus becomes *esh-shar el-`ibada* (month

of worship), *esh-shar el-karim* (noble of distinguished month) and *esh-shar el-mubarak* (blessed month).

The sacred nature of the blessed month can theoretically be translated as a state which is 'set-apart' and 'protected from the outside' routine aspect of existence-the profane realm. Durkheim (1976) defined the profane as ordinary, earthbound, without mystery, ritual or myth. It pertains to material and worldly life concerns. He considered the sacred (from Latin, *sacer*, untouchable) or holy as objects, places or concepts that are believed by followers to be intimately connected with God or a divinity and are thus greatly revered. Sacred acts or rituals also stand for the values central to the community; the reverence which people feel for sacred objects/activities actually derives from the respect they hold for central social values (Durkheim, 1976). According to O'Guinn and Belk (1989: 23), the sacred is powerful, extraordinary and unique; thus inspiring 'reverence, awe, commitment, sacrifice, and feelings labeled ecstasy and peak experience'.

Similar to Buitelaar (1993), I approach Ramadan as a 'liminal' ritual, a concept developed by Victor Turner (1977) and derived from the Latin word *limen* which means threshold. Liminality is an important transitional phase where individuals undergo change, since 'ritual time and space are betwixt and between those ordered by the categories of past and future mundane social existence' (Turner, 1982). Thus, normal modes of social action are suspended temporarily during ritual phase, and accordingly, it can be regarded as 'potentially a period of scrutinization of the central values and axioms of the culture in which it occurs' (Turner, 1969: 156). During liminality, for instance, profane conduct is expected to become erased or incomprehensible, while the sacred is emphasized. In these terms, normal social boundaries defining the sacred from the profane are expected to shift during the holy month to accommodate for moral training and exceptional piety.

However, certain key points need to be clarified in defining and applying the term 'sacred' in relation to the context of this research. In Islamic terminology, there are a number of nuances for the idea of sacred or holiness, such as *muqaddas* (transcendence

of God) and *baraka* (God's benevolent presence and power).<sup>7</sup> There is also the idea that what is holy must be protected from anything *haram* (prohibited material or acts), which is closest to Durkheim's conception of sacred. In Ramadan religious acts do not lose their unique character. Instead, they become closely connected to the profane. The modern context does not 'set-apart' sacred time and space from the profane world as clear-cut as proposed by Turner. Accordingly, I propose an emanation model of the sacred rather than a protection model to be adopted in examining the holy month in contemporary times.

In presentday Cairo, sacred venues become heavily intertwined with profane activities and interests. The mosque, especially during the *tarawih* prayers is not only restricted to prayers; socialization and networking also take place as will be presented later in this research. Furthermore, most mosques in Ramadan are decorated with colored-neon lights and banners welcoming Ramadan. Commercial vendors selling items ranging from 'Islamic' to ornamental items flock mosques during *tarawih* time to benefit from the large number of potential customers going for prayers. Indeed, the idea of the mosque being a *muqaddas* place that must be protected from the profane does not hold. Interestingly, every-day profane acts gain a spiritual quality during Ramadan. For example, the practice of sharing meals during Ramadan *iftar* (fast-breaking meal) and *sahur* (meal consumed early in the morning before fasting) is believed to generate *baraka* for those who partake in it. These meals are highly praised in the *ahadith* as will be presented in the next chapter.

Drawing particularly on Egyptian experiences, Ibrahim (1982) suggests that the month of Ramadan has become an interesting blend of piety and festivity. Ramadan in Egypt 'creates a life-style that is uniquely Muslim, with less than full-time work during the day of fasting, followed by evenings in which coffees houses are jammed, television programs are provided and social gatherings are organized' (Ibrahim, 1982: 34). Reference to my research on Egyptian Muslim mothers' leisure patters, it was revealed that regardless of social class, all the mothers in the study sample perceived Ramadan as offering them the unique opportunity to socialize more often among family and friends,

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<sup>7</sup> *Baraka* is defined as divine blessedness transmitted from God or Allah to any creature that God wishes to bestow it upon. See, Geertz (1971:4-55)

chatting, joking and exchanging information on food recipes, job opportunities and other alternative subjects (cf. Saad, 2005). Ramadan for the mothers was not only a spiritual month or *esh-shar el-rawhany* but also the month of *el-lama el-helwa* (enjoyable social gatherings), *el-sahra* (staying up late), *el-mut`a* (joy) and television viewing.

During the holy month in Egypt, many tents are placed in public areas where people can enjoy live music, food and socializing with others. These tents are called *kheyam Ramadan* and have grown immensely during the last decade in Cairo.<sup>8</sup> Ramadan lanterns also play an integral part in turning the sacred month into a festivity. Egyptian Muslims hang these lamps at their homes, shops and streets to celebrate the ‘*nur*’ or light of sacredness and wisdom Ramadan sheds on them. Neighbors in many Cairo districts get together to raise the money to purchase lanterns and paper-ornaments to decorate their streets. Children also enjoy carrying these symbolic lamps in alleyways and streets, singing and asking for gifts and sweets after breaking of the fast.

Another way in which the sacred and profane intermingle is through commercialization. To a large extent, the holy month has been transformed into a commercial one. The spirit of capitalism is observed in practices such as the noticeable rise of marketing on all media vehicles and high consumption of a wide array of commodities such as prayer mats, food products, fasting calendars, lanterns and greeting cards. Supermarkets, shopping malls and hotels change the décor, menus and overall ambiance of their venues to appeal more to a large market segment seeking an authentic traditional experience. Hence, they change their menus to include more Arabic-Egyptian delicacies and add lanterns, Muslim calligraphic art decorations and play classical Arabic music in the background. Ramadan has thus come to adopt major features of modern festivity, including a leap in advertising, which Walter Armbrust (2002) defines as the ‘Christmasization of Ramadan’. The case of Egypt is particularly interesting to study as its many diverse leisure activities have led the way in commercializing Ramadan to the rest of the Muslim world (Hammond, 2005: 261).

Accordingly, some past anthropological studies and respondents of this research blame market forces, modern institutions and aspirations for causing a disruption in ritual

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<sup>8</sup> *Kheyam Ramadan* are recreation venues where *sahur* meals are served and music entertainment provided



values.<sup>9</sup> Proponents of the secularization thesis argue that religious values have been replaced by secular ones; another-worldly orientation has been replaced by an inner-worldly one; and the primacy of religious institutions has been replaced by political and economic ones (Schluchter 1990: 250). I take on a difference stance here. I predominantly argue that modern aspirations of the Egyptian nation-state, people's desires for a style of life associated with economic development and Western lifestyle, along with new spatial changes in urban Cairo have given new meanings, functions and forms for Ramadan leisure practices in contemporary times. Concurrently, I argue that because of the distinctive spiritual and traditional sentiments Ramadan evokes among Egyptian Muslims, some modern and Western discourses are remolded and adapted to match local tastes and religious desires.

## **2. Rituals of Change and Modernization**

Many older theories on religion tend to treat rituals as static, viewing them in any society as given, and exploring their functions and meanings. There is, for instance, Durkheim's perspective on how rituals bond society together; that they are indicative of unresolved neuroses according to Freud's psycho-analysis; that they are connected to myths as proposed by Cambridge school theories; and finally as Levi-Strauss addressed, rituals reflect the symbolic meanings inserted in structures. While these studies raise important notions of rituals, they fail to note how functions, meanings and form of rituals change, as social, economic and political circumstances transform. They adopt the essentialist view of 'culture' as having fixed cultural symbols and ways of behavior, which coherently and un-problematically constitute culture of specific national and ethnic collectivities (Chatterjee, 1986). In other words, these studies don't acknowledge the fact that culture is ever-changing as society evolves.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For example, in some arguments raised in Alexander and Seidman's book (1990), modernity is believed to have weakened the hold of religion in society.

<sup>10</sup> In Turkey, for example, meanings and the rituals of the henna night (the bachelorette party) and dowry went through a phase of termination, mainly as a result of women's changing lifestyles and roles, but then were redefined and re-contextualized in harmony with individuals' modern lifestyles (Ustuner, Ger and Holt 2000; Sandikei and Ilhan 2004). Another interesting study on Chinese religious rituals practiced in Singapore, shows that because of modern living with new spatial organization, meanings attached to sacred

Western cultural imperialism and local appropriation, transmission of foreign images in the Egyptian local context and the revitalization of local traditions into new forms are all eminent in Ramadan nowadays. In this perspective, I examine Ramadan as a dynamic ritual or what Handelman (2004) defines as ‘dynamic framing’, referring to the interweaving process in which the content and elements of ritual constantly interact with the various socio-cultural environments involved. Accordingly, in opposition to Rook’s (1985) perspective that rituals are extremely opposed to innovation or deviation, the ritual patterns of Ramadan are treated in this research as dynamic rituals that have and continue to undergo changes as society modernizes.

I predominantly adopt Knauf (2002:24) modernization perspective which entails a core examination between ‘regional or global forces of so-called progress and the specifics of local sensibility and response’. Such articulation Knauf (2002) adds, provides an ‘ethnographically concrete’ foundation to consider the dialectical relationship between the global and local. This approach is particularly important as it stresses the fact that while modernization is a global phenomenon, it develops differently according to a particular cultural context. Conditions of modernity are mediated through local circumstances, the specific intersection of discourses of modernity with local conditions, which become only meaningful when examined in a specific empirical context. Modernization thus does not develop into a singular or coherent manner across countries, but rather takes different meanings or roles depending on local sensibilities, initiatives and responses.

Anthropology and cultural studies have demonstrated that the influx flow of information, capital and labor between places in the world has not created one unified culture (Appadurai 1996; Featherstone 1995). Ramadan festivity in Morocco as researched by Buitelaar (1993) and how it is celebrated in Java as presented by Möller (2005) takes on features that are different from how it is lived in Egypt. These countries have different cultural histories and thus the process of modernization developed differently and, consequently, affected the holy month in a dissimilar manner.

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space and rituals performed there, had to be reshaped and even substituted with new rituals (Kiong and Kong 2000).

Moreover, it is important to note that the process of modernization stimulates the search for roots, for markers of national and religious identity, hence the search for authenticity (Zubaida, 2004a). This pursuit for authenticity becomes particularly intense during the fasting month. Ramadan appears to be the 'ideal' time for members of the *umma* to revive what they perceive as original and genuine forms of their religious and local traditions. Some specific Ramadan leisure activities in particular may be directed at confirming or creating a sense of 'Egyptianness', in terms of construction of national identity. These include increased visitation to historical or religious sites in the old Cairo district, eating local meals or wearing traditional outfits that are perceived as 'authentic'.

What becomes evident in this research is that these longer-standing 'authentic' leisure practices and spaces become commercialized and redefined to match modern tastes and lifestyle. Global processes become intermingled with local cultural practices within the marketplace (Hall 1991). The result is the notion of culture hybridization that fuses modern discourses with religious and local Ramadan traditions, and blurs boundaries between the sacred and profane.<sup>11</sup> Ramadan traditions, along with religious connotations associated with them, and modern discourses interpenetrate and inform one another. As I shall demonstrate in the following chapters, the privileged social class segments of society get to live a 'cosmopolitan' Ramadan culture that encompasses cultural plurality and reaffirms their elite social status.<sup>12</sup> However, this kind of culture discourse does not go about uncontested.

### **3. Culture Contested in Modern Egypt**

Besides defining culture as non-static, it is important to acknowledge that cultural practices, such as rituals, are not applied uniformly by people, but rather their practices

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<sup>11</sup> In defining hybridization I primarily adopt Canclini's (1995: xv) approach that the 'processes of production and consumption imply that no realm of cultural production can remain independent of the marketplace (and vice versa), it should follow that entering and leaving modernity deconstructs-indeed dissolves into hybridity-the very distinction between tradition and modernity'. Hybridity can thus be viewed as a continuous process of transculturation, two-way borrowing and lending between cultures. For an interesting research on culture hybridization, see Werbner and Modood (1997).

<sup>12</sup> Cosmopolitanism, derived from the Greek conjunction of 'world' (cosmos) and 'city' (polis), describes a 'citizen of the world', member in a 'universal circle of belonging that involves the transcendence of the particular and blindly given ties of kinship and country' (Cheah 2006: 487).

and meanings are contested. Cultural discourses often resemble a battleground of meanings more than a shared point of departure. This perspective is seen by Yuval-Davis (1997) as a constructive view of culture rather than viewing it as uniform among all individuals in a given society. Yuval-Davis emphasizes that it is important to recognize the two contradictory co-existent elements in the operation of cultures: the tendency for stabilization and continuity on the one hand; and that of perpetual resistance and change on the other.

Traditions suggest continuity as they connect the past and the future. They are normative and moralistic, and thus have binding influence over group behaviors. They honor the past and value its symbols, which represent the experiences of their ancestors (Giddens, 1990). Besides, the continuity of traditions provides a feeling of safety and thus people hold onto them (Giddens, 1994). Hobsbawm (1983) and Butler (1995) propose that traditions are unselfconscious repetitions of practices that create a set of expectations which people eventually view as the natural course of things. These repetitive traditions or customs may appear to be static, but this is only because the change with each repetition is slight so that it is hardly detected. This gives traditional societies their belief of continuity, while simultaneously providing the arena for change, and allows them to respond to new modern conditions and lifestyles by adapting current customs or innovating new ones (Harris, 2006).

Conditions of modernity are those that represent change. Cultural and symbolic influences of modernization, including values that are attached to capitalism, information technology, economic progress and development and the emergence of the nation-state (Knauf, 2004) along with urbanization of space (Ghannam, 2002) transform societies. Foucault (1984: 39) noted that 'modernity is often characterized in terms of consciousness of the discontinuity of time: a break with tradition'. In other words, modern values are asserted while traditional values such as tribal honour, solidarity, authenticity and traditional gender roles are less emphasized. The assumption that traditions are being lost and rituals are losing their meanings appears so ubiquitous today among Egyptians.

The tension between continuity and change has particularly intensified during the last few decades of the twentieth century in Egypt, which brought radical transformations

of everyday life. Modern means of communication and transportation have had a large influence on increasing Cairo's connectedness to other cities worldwide.<sup>13</sup> Late Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's policies, particularly those beginning in 1974, marked the start of a strong orientation towards the Western world. The *Infitah* or 'open-door policies' by Sadat is believed to have marked major changes in Egyptian social mores and lifestyles. Sadat's policies reversed Nasser's policies of the 1950s and 1960s that restricted imports as well as appeals to Arab unity and socialism. Instead, the so-called economic liberalization policies opened Egypt's borders to the West, primarily importation of durable consumer goods that have been integrated in new patterns of consumption. This led to the emergence of a new mass culture in Egypt associated with consumption of Western goods (Stauth, 1984).

The country's increased exposure to Western capitalism and overall culture is perceived by many Egyptians, particularly older generations, as the main reason for the prevalence of the market culture, diminishing of Islamic knowledge and practices in Ramadan. For the affluent young Egyptians, however, consumerism and other modern discourses are not always seen as opposed to local traditions or religious values. Rather, many view them as compatible and inseparable.

Other key implications of the *Infitah* policies that had acute influences on Egyptian society were the accelerated rates of social mobility.<sup>14</sup> Sadat's political-

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<sup>13</sup> Egypt has always been connected to the world through trade, diplomacy, travel and pilgrimage. Egypt's ruler Mohamed Ali (1805 - 1848), regarded as the 'founder of modern Egypt', turned to modernize Egypt through developing education, sending educational missions to France, inviting European experts, upgrading irrigation systems and finding the printing press. Among Muhammed Ali's successors, the most influential was Ismail Pasha who became khedive in 1863. Ismail's massive modernization campaign encompassed the growth of the army, major education reforms, the founding of the Egyptian Museum and the Royal Opera House, the rise of an independent political press, a flourishing of the arts, and the inauguration of the Suez Canal. Under the parliamentary monarchy until the 1950s, Egypt reached the peak of its modern intellectual Renaissance. Intellectuals like Taha Hussein and Tawfiq el-Hakeem delineated a liberal outlook for their country. They expressed a commitment to individual freedom, secularism, an evolutionary view of the world and faith in science to bring progress to human society. This period is looked upon with fondness by future generations of Egyptians as a Golden Age of Egyptian liberalism, openness, and an Egypt-centered attitude that put the country's interests center stage (Jankowski, 1990).

<sup>14</sup> Social mobility is defined in this context as the degree to which different classes or groups of the population move upward or downward in relation to each other. The rise in the rate of mobility started even before the 1970s during the Nasserist era of the 1950s and 1960s, including the consecutive land reform laws, nationalization and sequestration measure, the increase of wages and income taxes, and the enlargement of free education and other social services. However, the era of *Infitah* or laissez-faire of the

economic processes have benefited those families and classes by enabling them to take advantage of business opportunities offered at the time; simultaneously it meant serious economic and social class decline for the growing majority of the poor. In his book *Whatever happened to Egyptians* (2000) Galal Amin tactically presents how social mobility is closely connected with unfulfilled desires, display of piety and wealth and other feelings or aspirations Egyptians face today. This concept of social mobility becomes particularly helpful in understanding the discrepancies of Ramadan leisure experiences in relation to social class.

Moreover, Sadat's economic openness triggered several spatial transformations in Cairo to facilitate the operation of capital and to meet the new emerging demands. These included modern (*hadith*) infrastructures, communication systems and other constructions facilities such as hotels to facilitate the circulation of goods and people (Ghannam, 2002). Two key spatial adjustments that Sadat implemented were privileging the gaze of the tourists and upper class Egyptians, and the removal of the shabby looking quarters that did not represent the 'modern' image of Egypt (Ghannam, 2002). This notion that spatial modernity is based on the exclusion of those less economically privileged (Mitchell, 1988) extends to Ramadan as well, where the poor feel deprived for not having access to several leisure spaces or commodities available to the rich.

Interestingly, during the 1970s when Egypt was opening its borders to the Western world and culture capitalism in full momentum, an Islamic identity and its practices (prayers, religious lessons and anti-Christian sentiments) and mediums (clothing, cassettes etc.) were also gaining hegemony (Abu-Lughod, 2005). The veil reappeared in Egypt in the 1970s. It was initially worn by university students in large cities, especially women studying applied and medical sciences who represented the core of a new tide of Islamism (Badran, 1991). The phenomenon soon spread among broader segments of the population. At the time, President Sadat presented himself as *al-Rai'is al-Mu'min* or 'the Believing President', and strategically used religion to legitimate his rule (Ghannam, 2002). His government supported Islamist groups to weaken the Nasserists, Marxists and radical student unions (Waterbury, 1983). Based on the

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1970s seemed to have witnessed a much higher rate of social mobility in comparison to the previous decades (Amin, 2000).

increased establishment of Islamist groups and in response to the perception that religious knowledge, as a way of organizing daily life, had become marginalized under modernity, a new movement was initiated. The Islamic revival or Islamic awakening (*al-sahwa al-Islamiyya*) movement was launched at the time, based on the religious duty that required all members of the Islamic *umma* to urge fellow Muslims to greater piety and to teach one another correct Islamic conduct (Mahmood, 2005). In Ramadan, activities of Islamist groups are highly concentrated and a self-conscious Islamic identity is revived to a large degree.

Due to the Islamic revival movements that have swept Egypt since the 1970s, there is a powerful new sense of religious knowledge, understanding and practice that an increasing number of Muslims have embraced. Simultaneously, the intensification of modernization has altered people's consumption preferences, lifestyles and ambitions to climb the social ladder. The tension or conflicting interests between global cultural practices and a religious identity, for example, is the most intense in Ramadan. In one incident, there was an American music clip on Melody Hits channel (Satellite Arab Music channel), depicting Western leisure lifestyle (clubbing, drinking alcohol and gambling), and on the next, there was a religious program presented by a *sheikh* (Muslim scholar) preaching conservative Islamic principles such as sex segregation at public spaces.

For that reason, Marsden (2005) addressed the importance of acknowledging the endless disputes and contestations that Muslims interact with. In their attempt to reach higher states of piety, Muslims 'face, explain and contend with inconsistencies and complexities in their attempts to live virtuous lives' (Marsden, 2005: 261). Schielke (2009) and Soares (2005) also note that the various normative expectations present in modern Muslim societies are often inconsistent with people's daily practices and social space. It thus comes as no surprise that Barakat (1990) criticized writings on Arabs that ignore the great struggle among conflicting values that historically shaped the culture; a struggle of tradition with innovations places people on diverging developmental routes and often separates them within themselves.

Ramadan will thus be articulated within the prism of competing and/or complementary meanings of modernity and those that indicate religious and traditional

authenticity. This tension is particularly highlighted when examining how subjects negotiate their desire for economic success and social development versus their sense of value and commitment to religious and traditional beliefs. This paradox comes to the fore particularly strong among youth.

#### 4. Negotiating Discourses and Youth Identity

Egyptian youth are confronted by a multiple, sometimes conflicting, discourses that become ever so intense during the holy month.<sup>15</sup> Some of the social discourses that influence youth behavior and are widely contested are those defining the boundaries between sacred and profane; gender expectations, and social class distinctions. These social discourses are subject to wide debates in terms of their realization of the continuity of Islamic and national values and change in relation to modernization. Which discourses are important at any one time depends on power positions (Bourdieu, 1977). Some important power dominators in Ramadan, whose discourses are complexly entangled, are those propagated by the Egyptian nation-state, commercial companies, media vehicles and *da`wa* preachers.<sup>16</sup>

The work of Marxist Antonio Gramsci and, especially, his development of the idea of hegemony is very useful in understanding how power works within leisure domains. Gramsci stressed that power issues from a relationship, an interaction between two parties. Power is sought by means of dialectical interactions in which both dominant and subordinate parties have active roles to play. There is an interplay of coercion and

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<sup>15</sup> The use of the concept discourse in anthropology has been greatly influenced by the work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault. For Foucault, discourse refers to groups of statements that combine to produce a regulatory effect. They are more complex than ideologies as they are embedded in power relations, which simultaneously support and resist them (Mills 2003). Moreover, I choose discourse as its analysis transforms the concept of culture into a number of dynamic social processes operating in contested terrains in which different voices become more or less hegemonic in their offered interpretation of the world (Bhabha, 1994).

<sup>16</sup> *Da`wa* literally means call, invitation, appeal or summons. The roots of the concept are embedded in the Koran, connected with God's call to the prophets and to humanity to believe in the 'true religion', Islam. While the practice of *Da`wa* take the form of verbal speeches, in Egypt today it comprises a wide range of activities including a percentage increase in mosques, social welfare organizations, Islamic educational institutions, and printing presses as well as advising (through preaching or personal conversations) fellow Muslims toward greater religious responsibility.



consent which establishes the dynamic of relations. Gramsci's concept of power relations is closely related to Anthony Giddens (1979) structuration theory, where he proposed that society is shaped by the interactive processes between social context and human behavior.<sup>17</sup> Thus, while the powerful community members may define public discourse, they cannot prevent others from resisting, reformulating or negotiating it (Foucault 1980). Hegemony is thus a 'control over public discursive space', with room for the experiencing subject to accept, challenge, or subvert different discourses depending on which is salient in a particular context (Ewing, 1997:5)

Accordingly, Samdahl et al (1999) and Foucault (1980) affirm that individuals are not passive, but knowledgeable and capable beings, as they have the power to modify or resist structural discourses mainly through negotiation. In defining negotiation, it is important to make two distinctions. In the majority of research, constraint negotiation is portrayed as the successful navigation of inanimate/static obstacles through a person's sole effort or accommodation (Samdahl et al, 1999). Accommodation is defined as the process in which individuals accept or adapt to existing conditions that are not challenged or changed.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, interactive negotiation entails discussions by those involved to reach new understandings of social expectations and responsibilities (Samdahl et al, 1999). Accommodation is different than interactive negotiation because it quietly hides a stressful condition rather than opting for changed attitudes and acceptance. Interactive negotiations create new meanings associated with broader cultural discourses, such as expectations on motherhood and femininity. Negotiation thus serves as one source of agency by which people have the potential to challenge or resist dominant social constraints. The communal nature of Ramadan leisure activities appears to provide many opportunities for people to interactively negotiate and, in the process, resist restrictive social constraints.

Wulff (1995:6) points out that 'when cultural processes are negotiated and formed by young people, we are dealing with youth culture'. In confrontation with multiple

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<sup>17</sup> Giddens refers to this interchanges between context and action as 'duality of structures'. Social context can be constraining in terms of directing human practices, yet at the same time can be enabling by being either re-affirmed or challenged by human behavior.

<sup>18</sup> Karsten (1998) for example revealed how mothers used a diary as a tool to manage their time between the domains of family, labor and personal leisure. In this view, mothers are accommodating to time constraints due to multiple responsibilities towards family, career and personal fulfillments.

discourses, we find Egyptian youth accommodating to some discourses and negotiating others depending on power relations, internalization of social norms, personal preference and available resources. They actively select which discourses to appropriate and which to discard. For example, in opposition to the dominant discourse that Muslim women's leisure should be confined within the home domain, some female youth refer to some *ahadith* or to renowned religious role models to support their right of admission to the public sphere.

Construction of identity is fundamentally based on social discourses appropriated. Our ideas of what it means to be a woman, upper-middle class and Muslim are formed by discourses and affected by changes in them. Their meanings are neither fixed nor static (Harris, 2006). In Egypt, the meanings of being a woman have changed as females' participation in the public sphere through education and employment has increased dramatically in the last fifty years.<sup>19</sup> The meaning of what it is to be a 'good' Muslim and the leisure choices made according to that perception, is also actively negotiated. For many of the participants in my research, being an 'ideal' Muslim in Ramadan is attained through active participation in philanthropic projects and adoption of modern technological mediums to spread religious messages.

It is also important to remember that people's sense of identity depends both on their internal references and on other people's views of them (Harris, 2006). How upper-middle class female youth negotiate religious, national and gender aspects of their identity within the modern context becomes a key concern for the wider community particularly in Ramadan, as we shall see later.

Moreover, it is important to note that people's internal reference of their identity is not uniform but can be better described as one of internal struggle especially due to exposure to a wide array of discourses as noted earlier. The global age places young people in unprecedented contact with cultures other than their own. Interaction with foreign discourses on gender expectations, for example, through American magazines and the internet, makes people reflect on their own culture. The young individual may

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<sup>19</sup> Percentage increase of women participation in the labor force in Egypt has increased by 43% between 1960 and 2000. See, World Bank's (2004) report on gender and development in the Middle East and north Africa.

feel an uncertainty about his or her place in the world as a result of a clash between his or her personal visions or ambitions and the demands and expectations of the surrounding society (Ibrahim and Wassef, 2000). This can eventually create a sense of social freefall defined as identity crises.

Stuart Hall (1997) conceptualized identity as based on difference and exclusion rather than being an entity in and of itself; for this reason identity is a fluid conception of 'becoming rather than being'.<sup>20</sup> Based on this definition, I will examine youth's leisure behavior as reflective of identity shifts as they actively select which identity to activate or establish and which one to reduce in relation to the holy month.

## **5. Upper-Middle Class Women Youth Leisure: Bodily Dispositions and Space**

Leisure has been commonly defined as a combination of free time (left-over time apart from that time a person is obligated to work), recreational activity (non-work activity) and attitude (philosophical condition). For an experience to qualify as leisure, it must meet three criteria: the experience is a state of mind; it must be entered into voluntarily; it must be intrinsically motivating of its own merit (Neulinger, 1981). In defining leisure as free time, free from demands derived from paid work and non-paid work (family and child-care responsibilities), religious activities will be included. In taking leisure as an activity, those practices that are considered to serve meaningful purposes, whether religious or mundane, are taken into consideration. Some of these fulfilling purposes include relaxation, diversion, refreshment and re-creation (Dumazedier, 1974). Many religious activities include these facets among other things.

Murphy (1974), Pieper (1952) and Kelly (1987) propose that religion itself may be a form of leisure since it involves the use of free time with positive anticipated outcomes. Religion and leisure provide the opportunity for individuals to satisfy their inner desires, minimize negative feelings and develop themselves using inner resources. Examples may include rituals of contemplation and pursuits to elevate the spiritual lives of subjects. Moreover, following the objective definition of leisure as a defined set of

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<sup>20</sup> This notion of becoming rather than being is closely connect to Saba Mahmood's concept of habituation which will be dealt with later in the chapter. This perspective places emphasis that a person has to work in order to realize the intended state of piety, for example.

activities in a particular period of free time, religious activities such as going to church have been included in Western analysis.

Defining leisure as free time or as a recreational activity yields objective and visible results which will become apparent in examining the bodily dispositions of young Muslim women in Ramadan. The analytical framework of ceasing and starting participation in leisure activities developed by Jackson and Dunn (1988) is useful in analyzing transformations in leisure practices (C.f. Stodolska, 2000). Jackson and Dunn (1988) argue that changes in leisure behavior can only be adequately explained if other phenomena, such as initiating new activities, are taken into account. By combining patterns of starting and ceasing participation, a more comprehensive picture of leisure is brought to the fore. In that perspective, I track the main changes in young women's leisure patterns throughout the year, the month preceding the holy month and, finally, Ramadan itself.

The purpose of this research is not only to map transformations of young women's leisure behavior in Ramadan compared to other months of the year. It also aims in uncovering the meanings young affluent women assign to their Ramadan leisure activities, and reasons for ceasing or taking up new practices during the holy month. Moreover, the purpose of this study is to examine other social groups' attitudes towards the leisure pursuits of those young women. Consequently, leisure will also be examined in terms of attitude or state of mind. Kelly (1982:22) notes that leisure is not in the time or the action but in the meanings associated to the activities:

Leisure is chosen because the activity or companions or some combination of the two promises satisfaction.  
It is the personal and social orientation of the participant that makes activity leisure or something else.  
Leisure is defined as the use of time and not the time itself. It is distinguished by the meaning of the activity, not its form.

This suggests that leisure is an entire way of being, an opportunity for building purpose into life, capable of providing venues for self-expression, self-achievement and self-actualization. This approach is derived from Max Weber's interpretive or symbolic interaction theory that focuses on the value systems by which actors make sense of life and its social context in a continual process of interpretation.

This research will begin with the social actors themselves who in their relative self-determination and openness of leisure express their self, appropriate and resist discourses of powerful others. Through these social actions, individuals can successfully acquire positive values pursued through leisure and highly strived for in Ramadan.

### 5.1 Youth habitus: bodily dispositions

Habitus refers primarily to the non-discursive aspects of culture that bind individuals to larger groups. Introduced by Marcel Mauss as ‘body techniques’ (*techniques du corps*), habitus can sometimes be understood as those aspects of culture that are anchored in the body through daily practices of individuals, groups, societies, and nations. It includes the totality of learned habits, bodily skills, styles, tastes, and other non-discursive knowledge that might be said to ‘go without saying’ for a specific group; in that way it can be said to operate beneath the level of ideology or worldview. Habitus in relation to leisure practices means dispositions of the body (appearance and behavior) in accordance to the space or context occupied. In focusing on practice and the habitus, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) further conceptualized that they are neither objectively determined nor products of free will. Habitus are cultural structures that exist in people’s bodies and minds. They are learned and internalized bodily dispositions, styles and aesthetic judgments that carry social and ethical significance (Bourdieu, 1984). Pierre Bourdieu’s usage of this concept to examine symbolic structure of class society may fall short in examining contestations revolving around youth’s bodily habitus. To understand this it is important to view the body as a symbol reflecting one’s identity and as an entity that is actively and deliberately shaped by subjects (Mahmood, 2005; Schielke, 2006).

Identity politics places focus on how forms of bodily practice express the self or one’s identity. In this relation the body is generally studied in terms of its symbolism and discourses about it as researched – each in their own way – by Mary Douglas, Norbert Elias and Michel Foucault. The body is thus seen as socially constituted, interpreted as a text or a sign to bear a range of gender, social or political meanings (Roodenburg, 2004). Reference to Douglas’ (1966) theory on body symbolism, the body is a social entity that ‘constrains the way the physical body is perceived’ (1973:93). For bodily technique is

learned social behavior; the social system determines how the body is used as a medium of expression of perceptions, norms and values. Douglas also points out that the body is a microcosm of the social body, a symbol of society; its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious in. The body is thus regarded as a complex structure where functions of its different parts and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures (Douglas, 1966: 115).

According to this approach, distinctive forms of dress-styles and consumption preferences all act as forms of expression of religious, national or other identities. Related to this study, this means that certain body dispositions or practices in Ramadan are regarded by some as symbols for Arab-Islamic identity that differentiate ‘believers from non-believers’ and ‘Egyptians/Arabs from foreigners’. In Ramadan some people take pride in wearing traditional costumes as a symbol of their ‘authentic Arab culture’ that stands in direct contrast to Western dress-style adopted throughout the year. Some women also like to take up the *hijab* or headscarf during Ramadan to proclaim their increased virtuousness during that period. Following Miles (1995) recommendation, I focus on the meanings young women attach to their appearances, purchased goods and activities involved in. Indeed, these meanings are the ways that individuals communicate and establish shared values of their identity.

Another notion for understanding the contested nature of the habitus is to use Saba Mahmood’s concept of habitualisation of morals and ideologies. Habitualisation or the formation of ethical dispositions examines the habitus in terms of its capacity of forming and transforming the self through body practices. Thus rather than focusing on codes, commands and prohibitions, Mahmood suggests that it is important to see ways in which for example piety is created and practiced. Morality from this perspective is about the conscious nurture of virtues with the aim of developing a virtuous identity. Mahmood (2003: 98) explains that ‘what is relevant here is not so much whether people follow moral regulations or break them, but the relationships they establish between the various constituent elements of the self (body, reason, volition etc.) and a particular moral code or norm’.

Mahmood’s understanding of habitualisation is based on two years of ethnographic fieldwork conducted among women’s piety movement at the mosques of

Cairo. She presents how her subjects strive to acquire moral virtues (such as modesty and honesty) through a coordination of outward behavior (such as bodily acts) with inward dispositions (for example emotional states and intentions) through the repeated performance of acts that entail those particular virtues or vices. Mahmood's use of the *habitus* in these terms is based on Aristotle's theory of ethical formation. *Habitus* in the Aristotelian tradition or moral philosophy is understood to be an acquired excellence at either a moral or a practical craft, learned through repeated practice until that practice leaves a permanent mark on the character of the person. In this sense, moral virtues characteristic of Ramadan are acquired through a coordination of outward behaviors with inward dispositions (intentions or *niya*) through repeated performance of acts that entail those particular virtues.

The virtue of being more piously strict during the holy month is shared, valued and upheld by almost all Egyptian Muslims. Despite the consensus about its importance, there is considerable debate about how this virtue should be reflected and habitualised.

## 5.2 Space inhabited

In forging an understanding of the interrelations between *habitus* and space, it is useful to draw on the framework proposed by Joanne Entwistle, who combines Foucauldian insights regarding the body as a socially constituted object with phenomenology's approach to 'dress as an embodied experience' (Entwistle, 2000: 12). Entwistle highlights the ways in which different spaces operate by different rules that determine the norms of self-presentation encountered by individuals as they move into and between these everyday spaces of activity. I argue that these spatial contexts coalesce out of the encounters and conflicts of urban life, struggles over representations of identity (religious and cultural), gender roles and social class relations. Public leisure spaces in Ramadan represent both the inscription of power relations in Egyptian society, and the continuously evolving context of the city.

Many scholars such as Bourdieu (1977), Foucault (1979) and Lefebvre (1991) researched how control of space is vital for the exercise of power to control bodies. Power relations become particularly vivid in examining public leisure spheres. Public

space is generally defined as an area which is in public ownership and accessible to all individuals. It is a space detached from the home domain, where people come into contact with others outside family and relatives network. In practice, public spaces are not accessible by all individuals equally (Thompson and Whitten, 2006). Public sphere should be understood as the site where contestations take place over the definition of obligations, rights, and especially boundaries of inclusion and exclusion (Eickelman and Salvatore 2004).

Gender is one key dimension in understanding the form and content of leisure in a consumerist society, and the specific experiences of individuals in relation to leisure activities and attitudes, particularly within the public sphere (Green et al, 1990).

Ghannam (2002) provides extensive accounts of how public space is 'engendered' at al-Zawiya al-Hamra district, a poor area in Cairo with few roads, amenities, services and with public housing. Engendered refers to the notion that public space 'both reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood' (Massey, 1994: 179).

Ghannam (2002) provides details on how women's interaction and access to public spaces is constrained while men practice more freedom due to dominant patriarchal expectations. Ghannam observed that while women are encouraged to visit some spaces such as the mosque, the workplace and the vegetable market are perceived in a negative manner. Men tend to frequent major streets, open air squares and coffee shops more frequently, where they socialize and exchange information.

Social class is another key factor that determines access to public leisure spheres. Today in Cairo many public spaces are being privatized and controlled through pricing or security. Abaza's (2006a) research on shopping malls in Cairo observed that a small segment, about 20 percent, of the Egyptian population access these venues. Shopping or eating at these malls is relatively expensive to the majority of Egyptians; and strict security placed at all doors restricts admission of those who are poorly dressed.

It will become apparent later on that access to public leisure spheres is not only determined by dominant gender expectations and social class affiliations. Commercial companies, nation-state, public figures and Islamist groups are other power-dominators that struggle over public leisure spaces and negotiate how it should be used, represented and accessed.



While public leisure spaces are, to a large degree, shaped by powerful groups they are also important sites for resistant behaviors. Foucault (1983) saw resistance – or the enhancement of personal power – to be available to everyone through the ever present opportunity to challenge the discourse of powerful others, and to create alternate ways of communicating and thinking about ‘truth’. Particularly within leisure spaces, individuals resist social constraints and challenge forms of oppression imposed by powerful agents. Various empirical studies have examined resistance in action, and the ways in which individuals have resisted constraints and empowered themselves through or within leisure (cf. Dionigi, 2004; Freysinger & Flannery, 1992; Wearing, 1992).<sup>21</sup> Certainly, within leisure domains people confront, play out and together negotiate new meanings associated with broader socio-cultural discourses. These include social expectations related to womanhood, religiosity, social class distinctions and cultural authenticity, as we shall come to see.

By focusing on leisure spaces as a site for resistance (and possibly empowerment), social and cultural change through contestations towards existing power relations are made most visible. Therefore, I take leisure spaces to be particularly revealing of culture dynamics.

## **6. Research Group: Upper-Middle Class Women Youth**

Egyptian upper-middle class youth are particularly an interesting group to study as they fight tough battles between change due to modernity forces and continuity of their culture. Further, since Egyptian women are regarded by society as the gatekeepers of traditions and future forces for progress and development (Shakry, 1998) their behavior and dress-style are subject to the widest contestations.

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<sup>21</sup> Women, for example, may challenge dominant societal assumptions and beliefs about gender through their behavior within leisure spaces. Personal or self-determined leisure, away from domestic responsibilities, can be seen to represent a form of resistance against the sometimes constraining roles of wife and mother (Wearing, 1990). In addition, women’s participation in male-dominated leisure activities, or even friendships with other women, can be seen as resistance because they can be used to challenge dominant beliefs or discourses about femininity and appropriate feminine behavior (Auster, 2001).

## 6.1 Young generation

Generation is one form of social identity like social class, ethnicity and gender. Instead of defining generation in linkage to kinship or descent, anthropologists see generations as a cohort of people born in the same time period who have experienced the impact of shared historical events and cultural forces (Lamb, 2001 and Erlich, 2000). Generational identity is thus established through common social and historical experiences, which supply the material of a symbolic culture and offers dissimilar people to feel connected to one another (Khosravi, 2008). Each generation thus differs from other generations in terms of certain shared experiences and reactions to these. Based on Karl Mannheim's theory, generational temperament reflects the socio-cultural context in which a generation lives and to which it reacts (Khorasavi, 2008).

Drawing further on Mannheim's theory and the work of Jose Ortega Y Gasset, Haggai Erlich (2000) argues that youth are 'conceptually shaped' by the common formative experiences they encounter at this time in their lives. In other words, youth are more susceptible to external change in terms of values, norms and perspective shifts in relation to older generations. Erlich (2000) states that experiences or events people are exposed to during their youth years mark the way in which they view the world as adults. This has long-term consequences on societal change as a whole, as members of a generation move into strategic professional positions or become transmitters of culture and tradition through their own families.

Similar to Khosravi's (2008) research on Iranian youth, collective life-changes that Egyptian youth face are reactions to 'split loyalty' between traditional patterns of life and discourses associated with a singular Western modernity.<sup>22</sup> They are torn between traditional norms and conflicting aspects of modernity that are apparent in their leisure activities during the holy month. Especially upper-middle class youth have the financial and educational means to access and make use of global and technological resources such as the internet. Yet many of them by personal choice and/or through family and social pressure remain attached to traditional and religious standards. Consequently, that

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<sup>22</sup> This notion of singular 'western modernity' positions the West as an essentialized 'other' as used by many of my interlocutors. However, when I use modernization I refer to a context-specific notion to modernity that takes into account local sensibility and response.

generation sometimes finds itself in a predicament caught between, what many perceive as oppositional, Western modernity and traditional Islamic values. Their dilemma and struggle in coping with the multiplicity of discourses and images becomes vivid in exploring shifts in their leisure behavior before and during the sacred month itself. Further, Egyptian young people negotiate this dilemma in their attempts to reconcile local socio-cultural/religious traditions with their modern lifestyles.

## 6.2 Upper-middle class

Cairo is the center of urban wealth and activity that contains a relatively large number of modest to affluent families. Timothy Mitchell (1999), after examining household expenditures and market size projections of luxury-item manufacturers in Egypt, concluded that beyond the state-subsidized super-rich, modest affluence probably extends to no more than five or ten percent of Egypt's population. The increase in the last fifty years in the number of wealthy families comes as a result of migration and employment in the Gulf region during the 1970s and Anwar Sadat's open-door policies (Arvizu, 2004). These phenomena helped establish a nouveau rich group of the population who experienced a sudden influx of money and introduced a new kind of lifestyle. This lifestyle is mainly based on free market values and high consumption. In Abaza's (2001) research on the increase of shopping malls in Cairo, she notes that consumption patterns serve to distinguish those who belong to the upper-middle class and exclude those who are financially incapable to access high-expense leisure facilities.

Social class is thus a strong determinant of one's ability to access leisure resources, such as space and activities (Wearing, 1998, te Kloeze 1998, Saad 2005). Macleod (1992) notes that the Egyptian upper, middle and lower classes lead different leisure lifestyles which are reflected in their overall consumption patterns. Upper classes in Egypt are generally influenced by Western lifestyles, travel extensively, go on long-haul holidays and access elitist leisure facilities. Some of the facilities that upper class women referred to in my research on Egyptian mothers' leisure patterns were private sporting clubs, health clubs, private beaches and resorts in the north coast of Egypt. The middle classes are relatively more limited in travel mobility and recreation spending.

Finally lower classes' leisure is predominantly based on social gatherings and other low-cost leisure activities. In Ramadan, however, social class boundaries are re-affirmed in some leisure venues and temporally uplifted in other spaces.

While Arvizue (2004), Abaza (2001) and other researchers affirm that upper-middle classes who migrated or worked in the Gulf region came to adopt new consumerist lifestyles, they do not mention that this stratum also adopted other religious values. It is also important to acknowledge that many Egyptian families that went to conservative Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia, came to adopt strict religious habits. In this perspective, the Islamic Revival movement, that to a large extent is home-grown, was further facilitated by those Egyptians who resided in the Gulf. For example, many Egyptian women who returned from the Gulf started adopting conservative *hijab* dress-styles. A number of the young women who participated in this research came from the nouveau rich segment of the population, whose families used to live in Gulf countries and came to adopt conservative religious values. Many of the women described their families as 'liberal and open-minded' in terms of allowing their children to have friends from the opposite sex, go out alone and encouraging them to progress in education and careers. Some others complained that their parents, particularly those who originally came from rural Cairo or lived in the Gulf, were very strict in terms of, for example, not permitting them to stay out late, travel alone etc. In fact, many of the youth's leisure that will be presented in this book will stand in direct conflict with some of their family or older generations' values.

While upper-middle class youth are smaller in number in comparison to other social classes, they represent one of the culturally most influential strata in society. Through their wealth and access to a Western education, upper-middle class youth have created a space for innovation and development in the cultural, political and economical spheres of Egypt (Arvizue, 2004). These people have the educational and financial capabilities to challenge, maintain and modify their socio-cultural and political contexts. Most of the women researched in this study have studied or are currently enrolled at private education institutes. Private schools and universities are considered by almost all Egyptians as providing higher quality education in comparison to state-owned institutes. Some of the universities that participants in my research are affiliated with are the

American University in Cairo, British University in Cairo, German University in Cairo, Modern Academy etc. Most of these institutes' curriculum is based on the mastery of foreign languages (principally English), information technologies and other business skills necessary for global competitiveness. They also introduce values of punctuality, achievement and other industrial characteristics deemed necessary for development. Due to the quality education that members of this social class possess, they are viewed as giving the main impetus for the development of the nation as noted by Al Torki (1988:52):

The study of the influential and the powerful is essential to our understanding of how current power distribution in society is conceived and maintained. It also guides us in locating the potential for transformation and change. Constituting the peak of the social pyramid, the elite make the decisions that affect all other social classes. There is no doubt comprehended in isolation or independently of those who wield economic and political power in the social system.

Moreover, upper-middle classes' increased exposure and interaction with foreign cultures provides interesting insight into processes of cultural hybridization. Their cultural-mix kind of leisure attaches this group to global urban youth cultures elsewhere (Arvizue, 2004). There are various examples to illustrate the hybridization of cultural elements such as the singer Sami Youssef's songs that adopt modern/Western music, English language and lyrics about the Prophet Muhammed and Islam way of life.

### 6.3 Women

The process of secularization that began in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Egypt has had a belated impact on the position of women in their families. For women, secularization created an awkward dichotomy between their role as citizens of the nation-state (*watan*) and as members of the *umma*. This dichotomy between broader social participation by women on the one hand and their precarious familial status on the other can also be observed in many other Muslim countries (Timmerman, 2000). Women are the basis of Arab-Muslim identity, symbolic representations of the community and markers of tradition and culture: Women are central to the social and moral order in the Middle East (Timmerman, 2000).

It is up to women to keep intact the honour of the family; where the family is regarded as a microcosm of the ideal moral order. Also as mothers, women fulfil a key role in passing on Islamic traditions. Women are thus seen as the 'mothers of the nation', whereby purity of the nation's women is identified with the purity of the nation itself.

In the same context, one notices that to honour the traditional domestic and familial role of women is often equated with retaining one's authentic ethnic identity (Eickelman and Piscatori, 1996). In other words, women represent the domain of the authentic, because of the connotation between them and the private sphere. Benhabib (2002) argues that since in almost all societies the first and firmest bonds developed in the private sphere tend to be with mother or other female caretakers, the private sphere is identified with women and femininity. Given that in most societies women also play a major role in the first enculturation of children, they are often perceived as the gatekeepers of culture and thus tend to symbolize cultural authenticity.

This is why the significance that is attributed to cultural symbols as markers of the ethnic group diverges for the two sexes. Men can change and retain their authenticity, while the burden of continuity is placed upon women. Middle Eastern Muslim women appear to be the main embodiment of the dignity and authenticity of the Islamic nations. This carries with it a great responsibility, as any immoral or indecent behavior on the part of women is seen to reflect badly on society. Particularly, in Islamism women are regarded as the embodiment of Islamic originality and, consequently, they have great symbolic value in distinguishing Muslim society from the West (Kandiyoti, 1995). Especially during Ramadan, women are faced with a larger burden of presenting a 'positive image' of how Islam is to be lived.

Moreover, the dress and appearance of women in Muslim societies have become a symbol or indicator of the progress of nation-state. Practices of veiling and seclusion of women in Muslim countries has often been presented in the West as a symbol that embodies backwardness of their society and thus tarnishes their own modern image (Ahmed, 1992). Reference to colonial history, Western powers, especially Britain, developed theories of races and cultures and of a social evolutionary sequence according to which middle-class Victorian England, and its beliefs and practices, stood at the culminating point of the evolutionary process and represented the model of ultimate

civilization. In this scheme, Victorian womanhood and mores with respect to women, along with other aspects of society at the colonial center were regarded as the ideal and measure of civilization.<sup>23</sup> This perspective draws an essentialist view of an ‘idealized’ Western modernity in relation to gender.

More recently, Islamist movements, in opposition to colonial and Western position regarding Muslim women, have used the veil as a symbol of the dignity and validity of Islamic values and traditions. At a more general level, women and the notion of family have become the source of Muslim identity and the area for cultural resistance. In other words, Western discourses have given new significances to the veil and thus created the right conditions for it to become a symbol of resistance (Ahmed, 1992: 164).

To sum up, the habitus of Egyptian women is central to controversies pertaining to Ramadan, because women are viewed as symbols of the progressive aspirations of the modern elites and, simultaneously, cultural authenticity expressed in Islamic terms. This group’s leisure patterns magnify contemporary key issues of contestations related to religious national identity within the modern context.

## **7. Cairo**

This study is based on extensive fieldwork in Egypt’s capital, Cairo, conducted between 2006 up till 2009 with special focus on the month of Ramadan. Cairo is located on the banks and islands of the Nile River in the north of Egypt, immediately south of the point where the river leaves its desert-bound valley and breaks into two branches into the low-lying Nile Delta region. With a population that in 2009 reached nearly 18 million people, Cairo is in several ways the core of the country. The city was founded about A.D. 969 when the Fatimids gave her its name, *al-Qahira* or the victorious one (Rodenbeck, 1998). Over the years, the city has been influenced by various civilizations including Arabs,

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<sup>23</sup> Lord Cromer is quoted to have said that: The degradation of women in the East is a canker that begins its destructive work early in childhood, and has eaten into the whole system of Islam. He found it therefore essential that Egyptians be persuaded or forced into imbibing the true spirit of western civilization. To achieve this, it was considered necessary to change the position of women in Islam, for it was Islam’s degradation of women, expressed in the practices of veiling and seclusion that was the fatal obstacle to the Egyptians attainment of that elevation of thought and character which should accompany the introduction to Western civilization (Ahmed, 1992).

Ottomans, Mamluks, French, the British and, more recently, by European and American culture.

The city's supremacy is reflected to how Egyptians refer to it, mainly *Masr* (Egypt) and *Umm al-Dunya* (Mother of the World). Cairo serves as the center of power for the centralized government state, and is also the cultural center of Egypt and in many respects the whole Arab world. Cairo has also long been the center of the region's artistic life, and has the oldest and largest film and music industries in the Arab World, earning it the name of the 'Hollywood of the Middle East'.

Cairo today is infused with emergent hierarchies of consumption, production and access to services. These hierarchies of exclusion and segmentation, that have for long split Cairo from the rest of Egypt, are evident within the city itself. Cairo continues to be the hub for contestations as increased regional and global flows of labour, investment, foreign aid, migration, media and political and legal activism confront its cultures, heritage and social, political and economic institutions (Singerman and Amar, 2006). Privatization and structural spatial adjustment, and the global flows and networks they involve, have had a tremendous impact on the city. Increased privatization of the country's manufacturing sector has, for example, triggered an explosion of 'new social forces, grounded in inequalities and in elitist modes of consuming, displacement and residence that strive to match cosmopolitan standards, while the living conditions of the many remain very localized, limited, impoverished and isolated' (Vignal and Denis, 2006). New circuits of distribution and transportation facilitated by new technologies and services, remain limited to the affluent few. Along with these transformations, urban development plans, both industrial and residential, have grown increasingly bifurcated. Moreover, a largely tourist-driven economy demands that the Egyptian government remain attentive to the needs, demand, and desires of its international clients (Singerman and Amar, 2006). Meanwhile, government officials' are widely believed by the Egyptian public to disregard major problems that poor communities, residing within the city itself, confront.

Cairo is certainly a cosmopolitan city, as suggested by Singerman and Amar (2006) in terms of the diverse consumption patterns, spatial and economic structures it hosts. Walking through the streets of Cairo one is confronted with an interesting blend of



old shanty quarter and new Western-style districts, foreign fast-food chains and along side it traditional *ful* and *ta`miyya* food-carts, people dressed in jeans and others in *gallabiyya* and those riding latest-model cars and those crammed in public transportation. During the holy month, as well, one is confronted with similar kinds of cosmopolitanism and contrasts as observed in people's lifestyles and leisure spaces.

## **8. Method and Fieldwork**

I am a native Egyptian, but have spent my childhood and large part of my teenage years in Khartoum, Sudan. At the time (1980s-early 1990s) Ramadan in Khartoum was, and continues to be, less recreation and consumer-oriented in comparison to Cairo. In Khartoum, there was only one local channel available broadcasting redundant Egyptian shows and series and low-budget old American and Indian films. The satellite dish was not available at the time when I lived there. After breaking the fast our only leisure options were to go to the local mosque for *tarawih*, attend religious classes, watch television, and socialize with friends at home or the few sporting clubs available. In Khartoum I also missed out on all the other unique Ramadan recreation facilities available in Cairo such as the *kheyam Ramadan*, special Ramadan-produced soap operas and television commercials, diversity of traditional sweet delicacies and dishes available at numerous restaurants and the unique recreation-historical spirit at old Cairo district. I remember the first year I spent Ramadan in Egypt I felt exuberated and overwhelmed with all these pastime options.

However, with such extravaganza came a lot of controversies that I witnessed in the Egyptian media, particularly the independent press, and by engaging in informal discussions with people. Some low-income people felt excluded from the Ramadan leisure spirit as they could not afford to access most of the mundane commodities and venues whose prices sky-rocket in Ramadan. Some individuals criticized the availability of 'excess' recreation commodities and facilities, stating that these profanities distracted their attention from attending to religious duties. The arguments are endless but they primarily focus on what the ideal is and how it should be realized: what makes one an ideal Muslim, Egyptian and woman? And if people agree that the 'ideal' Ramadan

lifestyle is based on pursuing piety, honoring local traditions and religious values, the case is still not resolved. People would then go into endless debates on how these virtues can be realized in relation to modern processes of progress, technology, fashion and consumer preferences. Answers to these complex questions can only be answered by having Egyptians reflect on them based on their cultural repertoires, historical experiences and social context.

Accordingly, a large part of this research is based on the emic perspective or insiders' point of views. In that sense I adopted the notion that there are multiple realities to explain a phenomenon and that the research process is subjective rather than objective. (Jennings, 2001). This approach is also closely tied to symbolic interactionism; part of the interpretive tradition within social sciences that seeks to understand the symbolic meaning guiding actors within the social environment (Blumer, 1986).<sup>24</sup> Symbolic interactionism postulates that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings those things have for them. It argues that such meanings arise out of the interaction of the individual with others, and it states that meanings are handled and modified through an interpretative process by the person who is interacting with any given object (Blumer, 1986). Within the symbolic interactionist tradition, it is important to understand particular motives and the origins of actions a person takes while interacting with his or her social environment (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). Moreover, social life is considered to be an ongoing process whereby social actors interpret the situations, objects, events, and people they encounter in their lives and act accordingly (Blumer, 1986). This approach enabled me to grasp some of the meanings participants associate with their overall leisure experience during the holy month.

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<sup>24</sup> Symbolic interaction paradigm has been employed by a number of leisure scholars (Kelly, 1983; Shaw, 1985). As Shaw (1985) pointed out, leisure is inherently symbolic in nature. It is laden with meanings, symbols, and norms that are given by the individual participants as well as their social environment. Kelly (1996) also suggested that leisure is a form of interaction that has rich meanings embedded within the experience of participants. He claimed that our definitions of leisure are not solely the product of our individual thought, but rather they are derived from our membership in both the micro and macro levels of society (Kelly, 1983). Specifically, people internalize what actions are appropriate within their social environment and participate in behaviors deemed acceptable based upon these perceptions. Kelly (1983) maintained that social norms regarding behavior dictate what activities can be freely chosen and which are constrained.

Besides conducting more than forty in-depth interviews, the primary sources for this study included notes from participant observations and photographs taken during fieldwork conducted between 2006 till 2009. These were mainly carried out through my attendance, and sometimes active participation, at various leisure spheres frequented by young women: mosques, philanthropic projects, al-Husayn area in Old Cairo, sporting clubs, *kheyam Ramadan*, cafes, restaurants, cultural centers etc.

Interviews and participant observation were conducted at some of the city's most elite neighborhoods: Heliopolis, Zamalek, Mohandiseen, Maadi and relatively new residential private compounds located on the outskirts of the city. These are mainly the areas where the upper-middle class youth reside and leisure at. However, to get a broader perspective on contestations related to this social group's leisure I chose to conduct some interviews with some people residing in Boulaq, a popular working class district with a long history.<sup>25</sup> Boulaq today is one of the most densely populated area in Cairo and is known for its retail, textile and car-repair shops and its second-hand markets in Wekalat al-Balah quarter. I selected that district in particular because of its geographical location. It is located just next to ultramodern malls and hotels and other empires of consumption along the Nile *corniche* or banks; and it is also in close proximity to those relatively more affluent areas of Zamalek and Mohandiseen. Many of the low-income residents in Boulaq express strong feelings of resentment and frustrations towards the extravagant leisure consumption of the elites. That feeling of resentment is further fuelled by the continuous encroachment of modern construction projects that usually involve the demolition of parts of Boulaq. For instance, around five thousand Egyptian families were moved during the period of 1979-1981 from Boulaq to public housing projects to 'beautify the face of Cairene society', the image of the city and make way to more profitable commercial projects (Ghannam, 2002).

In regards to sampling I used snowballing whereby I identified one member of a social group and then that individual referred me to someone else and so on. Regarding the main focus group of this research, young Egyptian women, I was able to identify many through joining social organizations like Sahara Safaris, Rotaract, Leo and other

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<sup>25</sup> For an overview of the historical significance of Boulaq, see the work of Nelly Hanna. For example, Hanna (1983: 32).

associations connected to universities. I also relied on my two younger sisters and other female relatives who are between the ages of 18 until about the mid-twenties to introduce me to friends from their same age group. They in turn introduced me to their families, neighbors and others from their social circle. As for the people of Boulaq district I was fortunate to know a family friend who used to live in Boulaq and, as I came to witness, is a very popular member in the neighborhood. As I caught on, his popularity came from the fact that he was perceived as religious, humorous, hard-working and with no past scandal of any type. Through this man (mid-forties) I was permitted access to many households in the area.

Additionally, I have used press articles, comic strips and advertisements from various publications to examine and present the main contestations pertaining to contemporary Ramadan leisure practices. These publications included lifestyle magazines, state-owned and independent newspapers, and other journals issued by universities and youth organizations. I have also kept close eye on the national and Arab television channels (satellite) and the local radio which broadcasted special Ramadan shows highly favored by Egyptians such as candidate camera, riddles and religious programs. One show that kept me updated on Egyptian news and triggered discussion with participants was *El-Beit Betak* (The House is Yours) aired on Egyptian national television, channel two. As for the radio, Arabic-speaking *Nejoom* FM (Stars FM) and English station Nile FM (located in Cairo) were particularly favored among Egyptian youth. Furthermore, I found it very helpful to examine the discussion groups launched on some social utility websites popular among Egyptian youth such as Facebook and Hi5 that included announcements on Ramadan-related charity activities, religious classes and recreation facilities.

## **9. Chapters Division**

The following chapters aim to direct attention on how Ramadan is lived by upper-middle class women youth and to social contestations related to their leisure behavior and spaces. Having documented these various social and cultural changes, I draw broader conclusions

about the dynamic interrelationships between piety, social cohesion and local traditions within the modern Ramadan context.

Chapter two will provide background on normative Ramadan with reference to the Koran and vast *ahadith* literature. This chapter will not only deal with prescriptions related to fasting and general behavior during the holy month, but will also comprise of the dominant interpretations of leisure in Egypt. However, to study Muslim societies only from the perspectives of normative Islam is not enough, since what Muslims believe they are prescribed to do and what they actually do does not always synchronize. I thus agree with Möller (2005) who urges researchers to explore lived Islam, Ramadan practices and take part in practical ethnographical work.

Chapter three and four will offer a third-person description of the shifts in leisure patterns with the advent of the holy month. Focus will be directed on young upper-middle class females' leisure practices. Chapter three will provide insight onto young girls' year-long leisure and, additionally, the 'crucial' self-preparations activities carried out before the holy month begins. Chapter four will present upper-middle class youth leisure patterns during the holy month itself. These two chapters are not only confined in mapping out shifts in youth's leisure behavior, but also spatial transformations to accommodate for the new demands of the month. These include commercial, religious and national interests that do not necessary complement one another. It is important to stress once more that Cairo's urban space is never totalized but rather a contested domain struggled over by different stakeholders.

Chapter five, six and seven examine the main issues of contestations pertaining to youth leisure habitus and spaces occupied. Chapter five presents how the virtue of piety is embedded, shaped and transformed through its interaction with the consumer culture. Chapter six discusses how contemporary Ramadan practices re-affirm and, in other instances, undermine social cohesion within the Muslim community or *umma*. It presents how the consumerist nature of some Ramadan leisure facilities and commodities excludes those from economically marginalized classes. It also shows how the communal, festive and charitable nature of the holy month allows subordinate groups to actively negotiate restrictive social discourses. Finally this chapter touches on how the Egyptian nation-state uses some Ramadan leisure facilities to enhance Muslim-Christian relations and promote

the idea of national identity. This notion of national identity sets the stage for chapter seven which deals with how the Egyptian modern nation-state and its regulatory practices have remodeled 'authentic' Egyptian-Islamic identity, to match its modern aspirations for development. This chapter also examines how some Ramadan leisure commodities and spaces blend what is considered 'pure authentic' with new consumption preferences and contemporary lifestyles.

In the final conclusion chapter of the book I reflect on the theoretical framework presented here. I draw main conclusions on how modern spatial, political, economical and global discourses have shaped how Ramadan is practiced and contested today in Cairo. I argue that Ramadan's leisure facilities and commodities are cosmopolitan in nature, which matches the affluent youths' identity and the nation-state's modernist ambitions. Also, I highlight the hegemonic struggles that political, economic, ideological and cultural power-dominators exert over public leisure spaces and women's bodily dispositions. Finally, I present how some of these power discourses are resisted and modified by the young women, through their participation in some Ramadan leisure activities.